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THE GENERAL BOARD

United States Forces, European Theater

Stragglers and Absentees Without Leave

MISSION: Prepare a Report and Recommendations on the Responsibility and System used by the Command Echelons for Handling Stragglers and Absentees Without Leave.

The General Board was established by General Orders 128, Headquarters, European Theater of Operations, US Army, dated 17 June 1945, as amended by General Orders 182, dated 7 August 1945 and General Orders 312, dated 20 November 1945, Headquarters United States Forces, European Theater, to prepare a factual analysis of the strategy, tactics, and administration employed by the United States Forces in the European Theater.

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STRAGGLERS AND ABSENTEES WITHOUT LEAVE

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STRAGGLERS AND ABSENTEES WITHOUT LEAVE

1. Definition of terms. Confusion of the terms used to describe various classes of absentees is evident both in official documents and normal usage.^{1,4} Absentees may be either legitimate or unauthorized and their treatment should be based upon the intent which caused their absence. Legitimate absentees need only assistance while unauthorized absentees require coercion to effect return to their units. Confusion of terminology has been partly responsible for instances, where legitimate absentees were thrown into the guard house on the one hand and unauthorized absentees had the chance to absent themselves again on the other. The following definitions are used in this study:

a. A straggler is a soldier who is absent from his unit without authority but through no fault of his own.

b. An absentee without leave (AWOL) is a soldier who is absent from his unit without authority and through his own fault.

2. Planned procedure.

a. Regulations covering. Chapter 4, Field Manual 19-5 covered the general procedure for physical handling of battle shirkers and absentees without leave (referred to as "stragglers" by the manual). Circular 120, Headquarters European Theater of Operations, 13 December 1944, as amended, covered the European Theater system for administrative execution of Army Regulation 615-300.

b. Basic principles. Absentees without leave and stragglers were to be handled alike. Forward units were to set up clearly defined lines, called "Straggler Lines", generally parallel to the front, along which they would intercept and check all personnel going to the rear. At strategic points along the line, collecting posts were to be established.¹ Absentees were to be reported by unit commanders on WD AGO Form 45. Apprehending units were to report recovered personnel on WD AGO Form 46.² Return of all personnel was to be through military police channels direct whenever possible and through reinforcement command channels when distances were too great.^{2,6}

3. Procedure used in the European Theater.

a. Division Level. Division commanders recovered the greater portion of their absentees themselves, within their own division areas. Division military police and regimental security guards were made responsible and were used to go almost into the front lines to recover battle shirkers and absentees without leave and to assist the return of stragglers. All such personnel were generally treated alike and were returned, in custody, directly to their units by the military police without assistance of an intermediate agency. Even in the best run divisions, military necessity frequently prevented the accomplishment of a written record by the recovering agencies. Absentees without leave from adjacent units, from corps and army units in the division area and from rear units were returned whenever practicable by division military police by the shortest route. Those who could not be returned to their units quickly were delivered to corps military police for disposition.

b. Corps and Army.

- (1) Absentees without leave. Corps and army commanders gave to the military police the responsibility for recovery, booking and initial movement toward their proper units of all absentees without leave found in their respective areas. For a time individuals belonging to distant units were returned through the reinforcement system, but this medium was neither able to process them fast enough nor to guard them properly. As a result absentees without leave escaped and had to be recovered again.³ Therefore the use of the reinforcement system was abandoned and all absentees without leave were returned through military police channels. As military police channels were also used for the transfer of prisoners both actions were frequently combined in the interest of economy of guard personnel and transportation.
- (2) Stragglers. Military police gave assistance in the form of road direction, transportation, gasoline, food, shelter and emergency clothing to stragglers, wherever individuals could establish themselves as such and prove that they were not absent without leave. Such assistance originated to a great extent the popularity of Military Police. Although mistakes were made occasionally and absentees without leave were erroneously taken for stragglers, this system was considered justified as the percentage of its errors was probably very small and far outweighed by its fairness to soldiers who were lost and conscientiously tried to return to their units.
- (3) In contrast to this system stands the method of confining all individual travelers to the guard house. While most units used the latter system initially, nearly all changed to the more lenient system before the end of operations. In some instances, stragglers were returned through the reinforcement command.

c. Communications zone.

- (1) Absentees without leave. Base section commanders were responsible for absentees without leave in their areas and delegated the job to the military police through their respective provost marshals. The procedure and experiences were almost identical to that of corps and army except that the number of cases was much larger and therefore the number of criminals mixed in with ordinary absentees without leave constituted a much more serious problem. Reinforcement command as a channel for the return of absentees without leave broke down in the communications zone also.⁵ A large number of apprehended soldiers in the communications zone were field force men who had drifted into the large cities and rest areas.
- (2) Stragglers. Initially stragglers and absentees without leave were treated alike, but, as in corps

and army, this proved unsatisfactory. Eventually the system of issuing travel orders and furnishing military transportation was developed and proved satisfactory. As in corps and army, the burden of reasonably establishing his identity rested on the man himself. In case of doubt he was treated as an absentee without leave.

4. General Procedures:

a. All echelons found the absentee without leave problem closely related to crime as well as to motor vehicle accidents.³ Frequently drives were conducted by military police, sometimes assisted by other troops, in city and leave areas to effect the recovery of absentees without leave. In forward areas, drives for the capture of overrun enemy personnel often resulted in the recovery of many absentees without leave. It was customary to check the identity of all soldiers uncovered in raids regardless of the mission of the raiding party. No echelon used a "straggler line" as described in Chapter 4, Field Manual 19-5 but all used collecting points and patrols of one type or another.⁴ It was more practicable to conduct an active search of an area to achieve results than to establish a line. Division military police got men out of shelter and back into the fight and all echelons raided certain localities and conducted area control searches. Use of the term "straggler line" in connection with a modern division or any rearward elements is an archaic description of the problem and does not consider the mobility of either the absentees without leave or the military police.

b. At all echelons personnel were frequently being brought to collecting points with improperly prepared arrest forms or none at all. Apprehending unit commanders were never reported for such omissions and the practice was never discontinued. Some collecting points refused to accept individuals without proper arrest forms and this caused waste of critical motor vehicles, gas, tires, and time of personnel. As this practice was not made a subject for official action it continued throughout the war.⁴ Apprehending agencies should prepare TPM Form No. 2 on all absentees, authorized or unauthorized. This form should accompany the soldier enroute to his unit. In appropriate cases WD AGO Form No. 46 should be prepared and distributed in accordance with existing European Theater instructions.

c. Initially some collecting points at practically every echelon attempted to work out a system requiring units to call for any of their personnel held at inclosures. In every known instance this was abandoned as impracticable and transportation to the parent unit or the next unit in the chain of delivery by personnel from the collecting point substituted. Often, delivering agencies brought back a return load from the forward points, however, responsibility for securing transportation was placed with the holding agency whether that agency was forward or rear of the apprehendee's parent unit.^{3,5}

5. Means required in the European Theater.

a. Agencies. Military police at all echelons and security platoons of regiments under divisions were employed in the handling of absentees without leave and stragglers. Facilities of the reinforcement command were used to an extent and would have been used more had the reinforcement system been capable of adequately guarding the

absentees without leave in their charge.

b. Personnel Required. Normal military police units were adequate at all echelons except in communications zone, where large cities away from the fighting zone and extensive rest areas made the establishment of large collecting points necessary.^{2,4,5} For these collecting points one or two companies per base section were used for guard duty. The largest collecting point (Paris) required two such companies. No extra personnel was required in the reinforcement command for the return of stragglers.

c. Transportation. Organic transportation of military police units was adequate, except that in communications zone it was necessary to secure additional trucks to transfer absentees without leave from base section collecting points to armies and adjacent base sections.⁵

6. Administrative records employed.

a. Theater Provost Marshal Form #2. Theater Provost Marshal Form #2 (appendix 1) was used by all military police units at all echelons of command for reporting absentees without leave, stragglers, violations of regulations and incidents of all types. It was satisfactory. For absentees without leave it served with necessary supporting statements for the information of interested persons and for a basis of action by unit commanders. For stragglers, it served as a record by which the unit commander could establish legitimate absence.

b. Absentees without leave Circulars and Bulletins were issued Theater-wide by base sections, armies and other comparable commands but not by divisions and corps, except sometimes for the benefit of their own troops. Usually the lists were in conjunction with similar lists of stolen and recovered vehicles, escaped general prisoners, and escaped prisoners of war. A monthly consolidated list was also issued by the Theater Provost Marshal. All were beneficial in the apprehension of absentees without leave, but, since they did not have distribution to other than military police units and headquarters of commands, their usefulness was diminished. No attempt was made to reproduce photographs, although it might have been effective had it been done for general prisoners and repeater absentees without leave. In general the lists were far too long because the system of reporting returns to units was never perfected. The lists continued to grow until tracers on absentees without leave initiated by the Theater Provost Marshal resulted in some reduction by removing recovered absentees from the list.

c. Special Wanted Lists. Armies, base sections and headquarters of comparable size issued special wanted lists which contained only persons wanted for serious crimes. Descriptions but not photographs were used. Distribution was the same as for the regular absentee without leave circulars. These lists resulted in some apprehensions and they might have been more effective had the distribution been greater.

d. WD AGO Forms 45 and 46.

- (1) Unit commanders prepared WD AGO Form 45 and forwarded copies direct to machine record units and agencies. Incomplete records resulted because unit commanders often did not know the required distribution.

Machine record unit facilities were not used to their full advantage and both the initiator and the receivers of WD AGO Form 45 failed to obtain the maximum benefit. Every necessary change in distribution required re-education of all unit commanders.

- (2) WD AGO Form 46 was prepared by apprehending agencies, but in many cases this was omitted.² Numerous absentees without leave and stragglers were returned to their units through military police and other channels without submission of Form 46. Had the apprehending agency prepared and submitted AGO Form No. 46 in each instance of apprehension as required by Theater instructions, many names would have been removed from absentee publications published by the Theater. It is true that there would have been Forms 46 submitted in some cases for which no Form 45 had been submitted; however it is believed that this would have involved no administrative difficulty and would have served to keep the absentee lists clear of recovered absentees.

7. Conclusions.

a. Revision of the definitions of the terms "Straggler" and "Absentee Without Leave" is necessary to avoid confusion. The following definitions of these terms are suggested:

- (1) A straggler is a soldier who is absent from his unit without authority, but through no fault of his own.
- (2) An absentee without leave (AWOL) is a soldier who is absent from his unit without authority and through his own fault.

b. Both stragglers and absentees without leave should usually be handled alike in combat division areas but should be processed separately elsewhere

c. The maximum advantage of raids, patrols and checks by military police on duty, regardless of primary mission should be taken to apprehend absentees without leave.

d. The principle of returning absentees without leave through military police channels is sound. However the return of stragglers is best handled by the most expeditious means available.

e. The conception of "straggler lines" as contained in field manuals or other publications is outmoded.

f. Responsibility for apprehension and return of stragglers and absentees without leave should be that of the commander of the area of apprehension.

g. The apprehending unit should prepare the proper forms (TFM Form No. 2 and WD AGO Form No. 46, when applicable) to accompany stragglers or absentees without leave enroute to their units; and collecting points and military police units should be required to accept such personnel for continuance of movement to their units.

h. In general, the means provided in the European Theater for handling stragglers and absentees without leave were adequate with the exception of guard, overhead, and transport for large collecting points in the communications zone.

i. Absentee without leave circulars, bulletins and special wanted lists, accurately maintained, should be published by European Theater, armies and sections of communications zone; their distribution in the case of circulars and bulletins should include all military police units and all units of battalion size; in the case of special wanted lists, distribution should be extended to all military police units and all units of company size.

8. Recommendations.

a. The definitions of the terms "straggler" and "absentee without leave" in publications pertaining to the apprehension and return to units of stragglers and absentees without leave should be as follows:

- (1) A straggler is a soldier who is absent from his unit without authority but through no fault of his own.
- (2) An absentee without leave (AWOL) is a soldier who is absent from his unit without authority and through his own fault.

b. Both stragglers and absentees without leave in the front line division areas should be handled alike, but in other areas they should be handled separately.

c. Maximum advantage of raids, patrols, and checks by military police on duty, regardless of primary mission, should be taken to apprehend absentees without leave.

d. Absentees without leave should be returned to their units through military police channels, but stragglers should be returned by the most expeditious means available, such as military police channels, the reinforcement system or other available means.

e. The term "straggler line" as contained in field manuals and other publications should be eliminated.

f. The commander of the area of apprehension should be responsible for the apprehension and return of stragglers and absentees without leave.

g. Apprehending units should be required to prepare the proper forms (TFM Form No. 2 and WD AGO Form No. 46, when applicable) to accompany stragglers or absentees without leave enroute to their units; and collecting points and military police units should be required to accept such personnel for continuance of movement to their units.

h. Sufficient guard and overhead personnel and transportation should be provided for large collecting points.

i. Absentee without leave circulars and bulletins and special wanted lists, accurately maintained, should be published by Theater, armies and sections of the communications zone; their distribution in the case of circulars and bulletins, should include all military police units and all units of battalion size; and in the case of special wanted lists, distribution should be extended to all military police units and all units of company size.

Bibliography

1. Field Manual 19-5, 14 June 1944.
2. Circular Number 120, Headquarters European Theater of Operations, 13 December 1944.
3. 12th Army Group After Action Report.
4. Report of provost marshals conference representing five military police battalions, communications zone, five military police battalions, army, and the provost marshal sections of the theater, one port, air force, two armies, three corps, and eight divisions.
5. Answers to questionnaires from base sections, Subject: "Stragglers and Absentees Without Leave."
6. Administrative standing operating procedure, 12th Army Group, dated 18 October 1944.

R E S T R I C T E D

Date: _____

SUBJECT: Report of Delinquency.

TO : _____ APO
(Commander, Division or Separate Organization of Offender)

THROUGH:

This report is forwarded for your information and appropriate disciplinary action.

OFFENDER: _____
(Name) (Grade) (ASN)

UNIT _____ APO

Offense and Circumstances under Which Same Occurred _____

Date of Offense _____ Time Occurred _____

Place of Offense _____

Reporting MP _____
(Name) (Grade) (ASN) (Organization-APO)

Witnesses _____

Action Taken by Military Police _____

TPM Form #2

R E S T R I C T E D